DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 090 EA 023 460

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TITLE The Impact of Interagency Relationships on the Educational Institution: The Leadville Center Project.
PUB DATE Sep 91
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association (El Paso, TX, October 31-November 1, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Agency Cooperation; Agency Role; Day Care Centers; *Educational Cooperation; Elementary Education; Human Services; Preschool Education; *School Role; *Shared Resources and Services; Social Services
IDENTIFIERS *Leadville County School District CO

ABSTRACT

The impact of interagency relationships on the educational institution is explored in this paper, which focuses on the Leadville Center Project experience. The project was an interagency effort in which the Leadville Center, housed in a former elementary school building, provided day care and coordinated social services in an economically stricken area of Colorado. The purpose of the study was to determine to what extent the Center and the Leadville School System had approximated the visions of Kirst (1990) and Cunningham (1990). Their views, respectively, were that public schools, to survive, must become a hub for comprehensive student services, and that to do so would require that schools undergo a transformation. Methodology was based on key informant interviews with a total of 22 teachers, principals, counselors, the center director, and the school superintendent. Findings suggest that the project has not transformed the school system, which continues to focus on its academic mission, and that the project has successfully achieved its goals. That the project was driven by practical rather than theoretical issues indicates the influence of economic climate on program acceptance and raises questions about the feasibility of similar efforts nationwide. (7 references) (LMI)

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THE IMPACT OF INTERAGENCY RELATIONSHIPS ON THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION: THE LEADVILLE CENTER PROJECT

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SEPTEMBER 11, 1991

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THE IMPACT OF INTERAGENCY RELATIONSHIPS ON THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION: THE LEADVILLE CENTER PROJECT*

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Having lost its principal industry with the closure of the molybdenum mine, the mountain town of Leadville, Colorado, faced a crippling economic situation. In the minds of many of its residents, the survival of the town and its public school system was in serious jeopardy.

For those people who did not move away, finding a job in or near town became exceedingly difficult. In order to work, people now had to find employment at various ski resorts which were thirty to forty miles away from Leadville. This produced a "latchkey" situation--school children had to be left alone early in the morning and late in the afternoon. Preschool children, needing care throughout the entire day, presented an even greater problem. Private day-care centers did operate in town, but not at prices ski resort employees could afford. Pure and simple, these people would have been forced to relocate if a low-cost day-care system had not been developed. This, in turn would have meant the closing of schools, or at the very least, an even more extreme reduction of staff and operations than had already occurred.

This dilemma spawned an interagency effort known as "The Center" or the "Center Project." The Center, which is housed in a former elementary school building, is **essentially** a day-care center which provides a preschool curriculum and before-school and after-school child care. The Director of the Center was hired by, and is subordinate to, the Superintendent of Schools. These two individuals either cooperate or collaborate with other agencies in providing additional social services--pre-natal education, teen pregnancy assistance, counseling services, handicapped services, and the Head Start program.

It is important to mention early that this study found that the above services appear to be housed or provided only in the Center and not anywhere else in the school system (elementary, middle, or high school). It was also apparent that school personnel, including teachers, other than those employed at the Center itself, are <u>not</u> involved in a **systematic** way in working with the Center or in providing a social service. This isolation of the Center from the rest of the school system (except from the Superintendent), its primary focus on day-care, and its being a product of circumstances rather than "trendy" literature or theory, are all important features relevant to the conclusions of this study.

*Presented at the Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association, October 4, 1991.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

In interagency literature there are two fundamental ideas. One, articulated by Michael Kirst, proposes that public schools, in order to survive and be more efficacious, must become a "hub" or "nexus" of comprehensive student services (Kirst, 1990). The second idea, advanced by Luverne Cunningham, claims that schools must undergo a "transformation" in order to become this hub or nexus (Cunningham, 1990). In a sense, the purpose of this study was to determine to what extent the Center and Leadville school system approximated the visions of Kirst and Cummingham. Had the school system undergone a transformation? Had the school become a nexus of student or social services and education?

These questions are worthy of investigation. The Center is receiving considerable attention and extensive scrutiny from scholars and other school systems. It is serving, whether it wants to or not, as a model of what may become the most significant national movement in education in this century. As far as the people of Leadville are concerned, it is probably irrelevant whether or not they fulfill the vision of some distant rationalist. For them, the criterion of success is the survival of their school and town--via child-care. They are meeting this criterion. Moreover, what has transpired in Leadville <u>is</u> significant and has noteworthy implications that transcend parochial interests and goals. Even if a transformation has not occurred there, it should not detract from their accomplishments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"This is not kid's stuff," declares Cunningham. "[It is not] the kind of talk that ex-jocks, now on school boards, engage in on Saturday Night." When something transforms it changes in nature, structure, and composition; a "thorough" and "radical metamorphosis;" the result is "something utterly different." (Cunningham, 1990)

Transformation means much more than a modification, repair, or expansion of an existing system. Kirst (April, 1990) puts it in terms of a "complete overhaul" of children's services in which the school becomes one of the centers for providing a "network of comprehensive children's services."

Kirst and others describe the current delivery of social services to youth as fragmented, redundant, and with little communication between agencies. More importantly, there is no follow-up system to verify if a client is actually being helped.

"In the typical high school, students see teachers for one period a day over one year, and no teacher feels responsible for the student or knows what is going on in his/her life. Counselors and social workers enter episodically, but lack sustained contact" (Kirst, 1990: 11-12). It seems fair to conclude that if a school system is truly going to transform it is essential that other school personnel (teachers, counselors, principals) be brought into the change process. After all, they are the ones who have the day-to-day contact with the students. It is not enough to have just one or two administrators promote the changes and accept a new program. Kirst recognizes this in calling for the creation of incentives for teachers, changes in training of principals, and new programs in staff development (Kirst, 1990: 87).

The importance of involving staff in interagency efforts is also emphasized by the Education and Human Services Consortium. To ensure that the partnership exists "in more than name only," those who actually deliver services must be brought in at the "earliest possible moment" and that other staff be kept "well informed." The Consortium also points out that unless participants are "fully involved in the partnership process, they have no real role to play [and] quickly lose interest." Agency or school administrators should not take it for granted that personnel will "automatically implement" a new program (Melaville and Blank, 1991: 25-27). It is reasonable to believe, therefore, that the vision of a collaborative effort must be one that is **shared** and not the sole property of one or two administrators. Implied in most of the literature is that a true transformation cannot just occur with a change in mechanics or operations. It must also occur in the **minds** of the participants.

METHODS, METHODOLOGY, AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Public schools functioning as a center for educational **and** social services is a phenomenon of recent emergence. The Center being just three years old is a case in point. Accordingly, a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach seemed most appropriate, since the task at hand required the gaining of an understanding of the nature and uniqueness of what may be the beginning of a new paradigm. Goetz and Lecompte (1984: 3-17) state that this type of design is particularly suited for "sensory accounts of phenomena as they occur in real-world settings ... ."

"Key Informant Interviewing" engaged teachers, principals, counselors, the Center Director, and the Superintendent. Twenty-two subjects were interviewed over a two day period (April 1st and 2nd, 1991). In grades one through eight respondents were selected to ensure that each grade level was represented. In the high school, respondents were selected to ensure representation of subject areas. When there

was more than one teacher per grade or subject area, names were selected at random. Counselors and principals were also interviewed, but because there were so few of them, to report their responses as "principal" or "counselor" response, would violate confidentiality; thus, this was not done.

The main ideas of responses were written down during interviewing and responses in their entirety were recorded verbatim by tape recorder. The set of interview questions lay on a continuum between "standardized" and "nonstandardized." They can be placed under the first rubric because of their formulation prior to interviewing. However, since their order or context was subject to change in response to the natural flow of the interviews, the questions may be considered nonstandardized. While it is true that the questions were "scheduled," this schedule was held flexibly to allow for prompts, probes, and follow-up questions.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe the present status of the Center Project in comparison to its beginning? What do you project for the future of the Center Project?
2. In terms of the educational goals and day-to-day operations of the school system, what has changed as a result of the Center Project?
3. How has your role changed as a result of the Center Project?
4. How has your involvement in this project affected your perceptions of the purpose of this school or the role of education in the lives of students?
5. How do you feel about the idea of a school becoming a center for coordinating social services?
6. Would you say the Center Project is permanent or experimental? On what do you base your opinion?

QUESTION RATIONALE:

In general, the questions were an endeavor to determine if the school system had transformed--combining social services with the traditional educational mission. While transformation, as Cunningham conceptualizes it, pertains not only to the school but also to the social service agencies that collaborate with it, this study focused on the school system. This narrower focus did not prevent, however, acquiring information about the community.

The issue of "awareness" is the subject of the first question. It is based on the assumption that school personnel could not have changed unless they were, at the onset,

aware of the major reform effort going on around them, and purportedly including them. To simply ask a respondent--Are you aware of the Center Project?--would not reveal much about awareness since it would have been almost impossible for an employee not to have heard of the Center.

Question two sought to determine if the school had changed its **real** mission. The avoidance of asking if the school had changed its mission was deliberate. "Mission" as it is usually construed refers to something that is quite general, abstract, and philosophical. While a school's stated mission is important it can often be unrelated to what is actually going on in a school, or it can be so general that it can encompass contrasting educational endeavors.

At the heart of the study is question three which assumes that if a system has truly transformed, there would have to be a change in what personnel actually do. If there is no role change it is difficult to imagine how a transformation could have actually occurred.

Changes in the way people think is the subject of the fourth question. If school personnel, as a result of the collaborative experience, perceived the school and its role as being more comprehensive than it had been, then it could be argued that a degree of transformation had occurred. The structure of the question somewhat assumes that respondents originally perceived their school as having an "education only" mission. Cases in which respondents did report a change in perception, follow-up questions verified that they originally did have the "education only" perception.

Question five deals with the notion of "shared vision." The Consortium, alluded to earlier, underscores the importance of a shared vision to the success of a collaborative effort. Did the superintendent and his staff see "eye-to-eye" on the alleged new direction of the school system, or was this just a special "pet project" of the superintendent and the Center director? Did school personnel feel that they were a part of this new effort? Was there any attempt to "bring them in" or persuade them to accept the changes. All of these questions relate to shared vision and shared values.

Asking if the Center Project was permanent or experimental (question six) was one more way to test whether the reforms constituted a transformation. In selecting exemplars of "grass roots" collaborative systems, the Consortium looked for evidence of "sustained change" and "good faith efforts to create more effective child and family-centered systems." (Melaville and Blank, 1991: 4) Question six is the most simplistic question in the set. Nevertheless, in terms of data-gathering capacity, it revealed abundant information about the origins, rationale, and true nature of the Center Project.

FINDINGS

Data acquired by the study formed fourteen thematic categories. These categories were generated from the literature, the interview questions, and the responses of the subjects. They were developed during all three temporal stages: a priori, iterative, and a posteriori.

CATEGORIES:

1. AWARENESS OF GROWTH
2. CHANGE IN PERCEPTIONS
3. ROLE CHANGE
4. OPERATIONAL CHANGES
5. TRANSFORMATION
6. CONNECTIVITY
7. SATELLITE
8. ARTIFACT OF REFORM
9. AFFECT OF THE EXCLUDED
10. PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTAT.
11. NOT PERC. AS SOCIAL SER.
12. NEED
13. INEVITABILITY
14. NEED FOR MORE RESOURCES.

AWARENESS OF GROWTH: There were twenty-one statements which indicated some degree of awareness of changes in the Center Project. Some of these statements, however, were trivial, or vague, or very general, perhaps indicating that some respondents were not well-informed or interested in the Center Project. The Center is "more well-established," has "greater acceptance," and "is used fairly well," typify these weak responses. In contrast, "infant care added," "summer care added," and "added early childhood parenting," were responses that reflected specific knowledge about operational growth or change. It was expected that there would be a higher level of awareness in the lower elementary grades and kindergarten since, compared to the higher grades, they were closer in age to the pre-school children served by the Center; also, these grades (K-2) included children who were "alumni" of the Center. While there was a closer affinity between K-2 personnel and the Center as compared to the higher grades, the responses of one of the K-2 personnel reflected an almost total lack of awareness of the Center--"I'm not aware of what is going on." While this might not have been significant if it had emanated from a high school teacher (much further removed from the Center), it certainly seems important coming from the K-2 level. This could indicate a lack of program integration or a lack of shared vision. Putting it into context with the other data will clarify its importance and shape its meaning.

CHANGE IN PERCEPTIONS: Respondents were directed to interpret "involvement" very broadly to include such minimal activity as attending the orientation meeting, which was held when the Center was first started, or the attending of workshops presented by the Center director (the workshops featured the "High Scope" teaching methods, an approach which was encouraged by administrators).

Change in perception statements included, "We intervene 365 days out of the year," "We intervene at an earlier age," and "school is now for families, not just children." Not all respondents who experienced a change in perception considered it a positive development; some believed that the school was straying too far from its academic mission. Other respondents, before the advent of the Center, had already perceived the school as having a "human-side" or social service mission and, therefore, did not feel that the Center had an impact on them. It is not easy to draw definite conclusions from this category of responses. Nonetheless, it is interesting once again, that at the K-2 level, only one teacher experienced a change in perception. Either the personnel at this level as a group have "always" seen the school as having a social service mission or mentally and operationally they are detached from the Center.

ROLE CHANGE: Do administrators and teachers in the school system do anything differently because of the Center Project? "Not at all," exemplifies the responses. Only one person (a high school employee) other than an administrator reported a role change, and this was stated as coincidental to the existence of the Center. Three administrators reported a role change, but one of these was the Superintendent (who "initiated" the Center) and another was the Center Director. Her role had changed because she had become the Director and was no longer a special education teacher.

OPERATIONAL CHANGES: While it may be questionable that the real mission of the school has changed, the students who had matriculated at the Center were reported to be different than the other students. The "alumni" were said to be "more expressive," better problem-solvers," and to have "increased their verbal skills." There was some suggestion that former Center students were more of a "discipline problem" because the "Center may be more permissive than the rest of the system." The reported difference between students begs the question--Is it possible to change a school system by changing the student? Could this be one way to effectuate a transformation?

Among respondents there was also a subjective feeling that the Center had made an impact on the various schools in the system. Respondents reported that the system was more "developmentally oriented" and was moving toward a "no failure" orientation. One administrator even claimed that "High Scope" (emphasizing creativity, decision-making, and choice), a hallmark of the Center, was permeating the rest of the school system. The study found little evidence of this, however.

TRANSFORMATION: What indications are there that a "sustained change" and a "thorough and radical metamorphosis" occurred in Leadville and its school system? Respondents stated unanimously that the Center had become a "vital part of the community."--"If we closed down we would have a riot." "I thought at first it was experimental. Now I think of it as permanent." "We'd be run out of town if we tried to close it." In specific regard to the school system, the most important developments are that the Center operates 365 days a year (not just nine months) and that it opens at five A.M. in the morning (not the eight or eight-thirty of the typical school). And at the crux of the matter--**if** the Center is perceived as part of the school system, it could be as one respondent stated, "School is now birth through twelve, not just kindergarten through twelve." Indeed, these are profound departures from tradition. To legitimately claim, however, that a transformation has occurred--the school becoming a nexus of social services and education --it is essential that the Center be **connected** with the school system. **Is it or is it not part of the school system?**

CONNECTIVITY: This refers to the degree of integration between the Center and the school system in terms of communication, collaboration, and joint decision-making. It could be claimed that some integration exists simply because the school district is responsible for maintaing the building which houses the Center. It was also stated that the whole-language program of the Center is integrated with the language curriculum of the elementary school. Also, according to several respondents, the idea of the Center was "born" in elementary school. It was also pointed out that the Center Director was formerly a teacher at the elementary school.

More subjective evidence of integration is that the Center Director, at the beginning of the school year (Note that this seems to be the only scheduled time.), meets with some teachers to discuss "special needs" children. Several teachers stated that, "We sometimes coordinate our approach with students we have in common" (Note that it is "sometimes" and is not systematic.). The Center Director also interacts with the teachers through conducting workshops on the "High Scope" methods (Note that this does not appear to be a required part of a staff development program.). It would be inaccurate to claim that there is no linkage between the school system and the Center. But it is more of a linkage than an integration, with the Superintendent being almost the sole agent of this linkage.

SATELLITE: **"It is not ours--we don't have ownership. It is the Superintendent's project."** The Center Project is overwhelmingly perceived as a special or "pet" project of the Superintendent--a satellite program that orbits around

the Superintendent, but does not orbit around the rest of the school system. Indeed, more people would be opposed philosophically to the Center if they thought it was part of the school system. "It is not supposed to be part of the school." "Technically, it is not part of the school system." "People now accept the Project because they know it is not part of the school." "There was a suspicion that school funds were being used for transportation and maintenance. If so, this would be wrong. It is not supposed to be part of the school district." "It is self-funded--no tax dollars are used." If a transformation has occurred in Leadville, it must be asked, why is it that the public will not support it with public funds?

The metaphors of "satellite" and "connectivity" are antithetical. Respondents' remarks reflect the remoteness of this satellite. "There has not been any change in my role." "I have not noticed any change in educational goals and day-to-day operations." "I'm not aware of any changes in the Center." "I'm not getting feedback; we're not interconnected." "The purpose and role have not changed. It is still primarily academic." "It's his project." The undeniable theme which emerges is that if there has been a transformation resulting in interagency collaboration in Leadville, the school system is not part of it--unless the Superintendent alone is perceived as "the school."

ARTIFACT OF REFORM: It may be more useful to visualize the Center as one part of, or as a manifestation of a package of school reforms. "The Center is the beginning of a restructuring effort; it must start at the lower levels [elementary and pre-school]." There is a restructuring here and a redefining of our focus, but the Center has not been a part of it." Among the reforms are block scheduling, a class in environmental education, "whole-language," multi-modality teaching, and "Math--Their Way."

AFFECT OF THE EXCLUDED: As mentioned earlier, there is a very noticeable feeling among school personnel that they have been "left out" of the highly acclaimed Center Project. This is a negative current which includes indifference, jealousy, and masked hostility. Exacerbating these feelings are two other factors. One is the reduction-in-force which has taken place over the last several years. The second is that the attention of the media and scholars has been focused almost entirely on the Center to the exclusion of the school system. "We have funds for the Center, but nothing for the rest of the school." "The high school has become the least important." "The Superintendent spends more time at the Center than any place else." One individual, who felt especially victimized by the changes that had occurred, sees the creation of the Center at the root of most of the problems in the school system. "We have gone from a school district to being a Center." His perception is highly

idiosyncratic and his response that the school system has now become a center must be classified as an outlier.

PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION: Subjects were asked to transcend their own situation in Leadville and to state, generally, whether they were in favor of, or opposed to schools becoming centers for coordinating social services. "Very, very good idea--good direction to move in--services must be coordinated--school should be the one to do it." In contrast, "No, disagree--school has too much to do--we would be getting away from the academic mission."

While Leadville may not be a hotbed of "flaming liberalism," and while some people are definitely opposed to schools becoming such centers, there is definite support for the idea. If the Superintendent and school district wanted to move in this direction, the support is there among school district personnel. So far, this support has been largely unnoticed or ignored, definitely untapped and unused. Thus, there exists fertile grounds for alliances and coalitions between the Superintendent and his subordinates.

CENTER NOT PERCEIVED AS A PROVIDER OF SOCIAL SERVICES: It seems highly ironic that while there is philosophical acceptance of a transformation, many of these same individuals do not perceive the Center Project as a social service or the beginning of a transformation. "The Center does not provide social services--the community does." "It is not a social service." "The school is not providing a social service by running the Center."

This perception persists in spite of a number of services being run through the Center: parenting classes, pre-natal care, teen pregnancy classes, counseling, services for the handicapped, and Head Start. There is, undeniably, some form of inter-agency interaction. Why school personnel don't see this might be explained by reviewing some of the earlier conclusions: no role change among school personnel, no operational changes within the school system, the Center existing as a "satellite", and the exclusion of school personnel from the Center Project.

NEED: Leadville and its school district were compelled to create the Center or something like it. "We did this in order for this town and school system to survive." "The Center is a product of circumstances." What was done in Leadville was, in some respects, an ad lib or an improvisation. It is similar to what farmers do when their equipment breaks down in the middle of nowhere--far from the services of a trained mechanic or repair mannual. They "gerry-rig it."--a piece of bailing wire in place of a bolt, or a piece of rubber inner-tube in place of a latch or spring. "What the hell, it works."

This is not meant to denigrate the Center or its creators. It works! Center enrollment has increased five-fold in its three year existence. In their gerry-rigging they perhaps

have created something new--a model. Quite often the creator of a new paradigm is not the one who invents or discovers something new, but rather it is someone who discovers the discovery and presents it in a compelling way. Whether Leadville made a discovery or is being discovered is open to argument.

INEVITABILITY: The pall of having to accept change looms over the heads of many of the school personnel. "It is the way the education system is going." "Reality says we have to." "We may have to end up doing this." "It is probably the trend." While the promoters of reform might hope for more enthusiasm than this, it points out, once again, that it is the teachers who will have to make the adjustments, bear the burden of change, and be the ones who actually implement the transformation in the school--if it is to occur.

NEED FOR MORE RESOURCES: To inspire teachers to make this adjustment and commitment would, according to respondents, require "more pay and training." The school would need more "money and power." "Something would have to give; either current teaching responsibilities would have to be reduced or additional teachers would have to be hired." There is a message here for those in power at the federal level. If this transformation is to occur, "someone will have to put their money where their mouth is." During the last decade we have had more rhetoric than action.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study does not presume that the Leadville school system should be anything different than what it is, or should be doing anything differently. The theories of nexus and transformation were employed primarily as heuristic devices--looking glasses to help guide (but not blind) the observations. However, according to definition, it must be stated that no transformation has occurred in the school system. The potential exists for such change and may occur if given enough time. The school system is not yet a center for student or social services, but rather still focuses on an academic mission. The Center is not really integrated with the school system. Except for the Superintendent, it can hardly be considered a part of it.

The Center Project appears to be highly successful in meeting its goals and, therefore, is worthy of study. To move beyond this point (if this is what the school district wants) to a transformational level, a vigorous "personal relations" campaign initiated by the administrative sector might be in order. Some barriers and negative feelings exist, but these are not insurmountable. Effective change agency (Hall, 1987) makes subordinates feel that they have a role to play and are needed.

The creation of the Center was pragmatically driven rather than driven by theory or philosophy. Transformation requires both--an operational (implementational) change and philosophical acceptance. For "sustained change" to occur, the people involved must eventually "buy into" the idea or theory. Most educational reforms have failed, as John Goodlad points out, because teachers, once they return to their classrooms, keep doing things "the same old way." They have not, in the past, "bought into" the ideas behind most reforms. Many of these reforms have occurred only in the minds and conversations of administrators or policymakers.

It is interesting to speculate whether Leadville would have embraced the Center in the context of a healthy economy. This same issue may be played out across the country if there is indeed a national movement toward school-centered interagency operations. Can something like this originate solely out of theory or vision? It remains to be seen whether transformations can occur nation-wide, especially in areas where it is needed the most.

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